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12 February 1986

MEMORANDUM:

Turkey: The Syrian Threat

Relations between Turkey and Syria have been historically strained, and the Turks view Syria as a potential military threat. Turkish suspicions are fed by Syria's military relationship with the USSR, its irredentist claims on Turkish territory, and its support for anti-Turkish terrorists. Turkey is also worried about an alleged buildup of Syrian and Soviet forces on the border, although we have no evidence of such a buildup. Syria probably does not want a confrontation, but the differences between the two countries will keep Turkish suspicions alive.

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Sources of Tension

Tensions between Turkey and Syria, rooted in historical antagonisms, continue to be fed by more current frictions.

- o The Turks regard Syrian irredentism as a potential threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. Syria does not acknowledge Turkish sovereignty over the province of Hatay, which the French colonial rulers of Syria ceded to Turkey, and Syrian maps continue to show it as part of Syria.
- o These concerns are deepened by Syria's willingness to serve as a haven for Turkish terrorists.
- o Syria's military relationship with the Soviet Union arouses Turkish fears. The Turks believe the Soviets are arming Syria far beyond its needs, worry that these arms could be turned against Turkey, and suspect the Soviets are supporting a buildup on the border.
- o Quarrels over water rights -- always a serious issue in the Middle East -- complicate relations between Turkey and

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Syria. A huge Turkish dam project will permanently lower water levels in Syria, and the Turks are aware of Syrian resentment. [redacted]

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The Military Threat

The Turks are convinced that Syria is building up its forces on its border with Turkey. The Turkish foreign minister charged publicly in November that Syria had deployed "one or two battalions" along the border. The unpublicized official suspicion is that the buildup has been considerably greater and that the Soviets are directly involved. The Turks have claimed to US representatives on several occasions that the Soviets have prepositioned a division equipment package in Syria and have begun to build up their "forces" near the Turkish border with missile and artillery batteries. [redacted]

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These concerns appear exaggerated. [redacted]

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[redacted] given Syria's demonstrated reluctance to permit the Soviets a free hand on their territory -- we do not expect this to happen. The Syrians themselves have little military capacity to spare for deployments on the Turkish border, given their ongoing confrontation with Israel and their involvement in Lebanon. [redacted]

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[redacted] they normally monitor the border with one border guard regiment of about 1,500 men equipped with jeeps and small arms. [redacted]

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In theory, the Syrian Army's eight regular divisions constitute a formidable threat to Turkey. In practice, they are committed to Lebanon and to the defense of the Golan Heights and Damascus against Israel. The Syrians would be hard-pressed to send even two or three brigades to the Turkish border. [redacted]

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The Terrorism Problem

The Turks are convinced that Syria is supporting anti-Turkish terrorists -- primarily Kurds and Armenians, but also Turkish Communists - with training, equipment, and help in infiltrating into Turkey. They believe Syrian camps used for training Palestinians -- with Soviet support -- are also used to train anti-Turkish operatives. [redacted]

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There is some justification for Turkish suspicions. The Syrians openly harbor anti-Turkish refugees, and we believe Syria, at a minimum, turns a blind eye to terrorist activities directed against Turkey. Syria strongly supports Kurdish rebels in Iraq and would find it difficult to prevent Iraqi Kurds from helping their Turkish cousins even if it were inclined to do so. [redacted]

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Outlook

We believe both Ankara and Damascus prefer to deal with their differences in diplomatic channels. There is no evidence that either side wants a confrontation and both have greater concerns elsewhere. The differences which divide them are great, however, and there is no sign that they will be overcome anytime soon. Under these circumstances, a serious escalation of tensions is always possible.

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SUBJECT: Turkey: The Syrian Threat

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